

# *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*

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*Volume 14, Issue 1*

2013

*Article 3*

VILLAINS

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## Introduction: Villains

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# Introduction

## A.C. Hawley

This issue of *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* started with a realization about the current cultural moment. When we wrote the Call for Papers, *Mad Men*, the AMC drama about 1960s advertising, was gaining more and more popularity as well as critical acclaim. For those who have never seen the program, the show focuses on the goings on at Sterling Cooper—which later became Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce—a full service advertising shop on Madison Avenue. Among the many characters on the show, the primary protagonist on the show is Don Draper. The word “protagonist” is a problematic one in this context for a few different reasons.

To start, Don Draper is living a lie. His real name is Dick Whitman, a fact that he hid from his first wife Betty for many years and caused their marriage to dissolve. In addition to lying to his wife about his name, Draper has also hidden his perpetual philandering from Betty. In fact, his current wife Megan was one of the women with whom he cheated on Betty. If this were not enough, Don Draper is also a ruthless taskmaster, frequently pushing his staff to its wits end and forcing them to work extremely long hours to get something resembling the result he desires. From week to week, the viewer sees that he shows little compassion for the people around him, yet he’s the protagonist. Even though we are horrified by

what he does, Don Draper is also the person that the viewer is supposed to root for, to support, to care about in the narrative of the show.

This bizarre relationship to the protagonist led to questions about what a hero truly is. Given his conduct, many people call Draper an anti-hero, but that was far too simplistic for my taste. When you cheat on your wife and misrepresent who you are, that makes you, in my mind, a villain. My own personal perception is not the norm as many have taken to using anti-hero to define morally ambiguous characters like Draper and Walter White on *Breaking Bad*. Given that we are in the midst of a massive cultural shift in regards to what constitutes a hero, it seemed prudent to ask what a villain is. Thanks to the prevalence of superheroes in our society—something that we have added to with our issue on comics—villains are very simplistically coded. We believe that there is much more to these characters. Can't these archetypically bad characters be somewhat positive? Is it not possible for these characters to be something greater than Snidley Whiplash, the handlebar mustache-twirling bastard that Dudley Do-Right had to constantly foil at every turn?

The five articles and one dialogue published here push our conceptualization of the villain forward, challenging its assumed location and forcing a reconsideration of what truly makes a person one. Samantha Przybylowicz takes a different look at the classic British novel *Wuthering Heights*. While the book does have a clearly marked villain in Heathcliff for what he did to Catherine during the narrative, Przybylowicz goes further in suggesting that all of the characters in the book are actually villains as none of them are of pure intention; each one has their own motivations which push them forward.

In her essay on religious villains, Verna Ehret contemplates killers in history who have justified their actions by using religious narratives. As lives have changed, the importance of the narrative has diminished and morally complex murderers like Norwegian mass murderer Anders Brevik have appeared, Ehret's article constructs a new system by which to identify religious villains that considers past narratives as well as a moral calculus, one which hinges on the ability to articulate what viciousness and evil are and how these people destroy the lives of those with whom they disagree.

Returning to the conundrum that I presented above with Don Draper, Daniel Boscajon's article on the villain Two-Face examines how the villain might actually contain some good. Focusing on this villain's role in the movie *The Dark Knight*, Boscajon uses Eco, Kant & Ricouer to show how Two-Face undermines the us/them dichotomy in superhero media by showing the ability to think and live independent of sociocultural standards.

In "The Devil in Fred Stonehouse", J. Sage Elwell is interested in looking at a villain that exists in all cultures: the devil. Elwell questions how this figure has been represented in a space that is beyond evil, a place where its terrifying pres-

ence has been diluted by popular culture and disbelief in these religious stories. The answer for Elwell can be found in the artwork of American artist Fred Stonehouse, an artist who is able to navigate the historical understanding of the devil as well as its diminished standing in modern society.

Another figure who has taken on a diminished role is the zombie. Saturating the media landscape in recent years, the mindless consumerism that the zombies were meant to symbolize in movies like George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* has been greatly forgotten. Nicholas M. Kelly sees this shift happening as well and reframes how we should understand the undead. Examining the movie *Zombie-land* and the video game *Left 4 Dead 2*, Kelly observes that zombies have become the vehicles for unplaced aggression and violent entertainment, which is symbolic of the economic changes that have happened in this current phase of late capitalism.

The last piece in this journal is one that caused much consternation within the editorial board, yet its message is deceptively simple. Jon Cotner and Andy Fitch's dialogue meanders through a number of different topics like living in New York City and being a part of a community. The main question here is who the actual criminal is. Is it the two people in the article, both of whom have stolen products from "W.F." but have done so to survive, or the companies that do much worse? There are other questions that are floating around there as well, but those must be left for the reader to discover on their own.

While this issue is not meant to make you like villains or even hold them close to your heart, we do hope that you can see how complicated they truly can be as people and characters in our world.

